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'Tilting' or 'Balancing'?

The Russians are up to their old game in the Iraqi-Iranian war: publicly professing sentiments of neutrality and hopes for peaceful settlement, while secretly stirring things up for Soviet advantage.

U.S. intelligence analysts are watching with a mixture of trepidation and exasperation to see if the Kremlin gets away with its latest double-dealing. Some of our experts think the Soviets may bring it off; others don't see how they can.

Despite their announced hands-off policy, the Russians are supplying both sides with armaments, though not in amounts great enough to let either side win decisively. It's a delicate business, and the Soviets could wind up alienating either or both of the antagonists.

But the manipulators in the Kremlin evidently feel the stakes are worth the risk, and they are playing their cards with their usual skill. Some experts conclude the Soviets will simply try to continue their dangerous balancing act between the two adversaries in the hope that when the shooting is over, they will be on the winning side—no matter who is the victor.

But there are some analysts who discern a Soviet "tilt" toward Iran—which is strategically and economically more valuable to the Russians. Several times a week, transport planes fly from North Korea to Iran carrying Soviet-made military hardware: sophisticated surface-to-air missiles, anti-tank rockets, ammunition and spare parts. North Korea is held so tightly in the Soviet grip that the arms flights probably have Moscow's acquiescence.

Meanwhile, the Russians have cut off military supplies to their nominal ally, Iraq, which is desperately dependent on these shipments to maintain its Soviet-made weapons and replace the increasing battle losses. Top Iraqi leaders have flown to Moscow to plead for more arms, but their bargaining position is weak.

"The Iraqis will do almost anything to get their resupply, and the Soviets know it," one expert told my associate Lucette Lagnado. There is even a distinct possibility that the Kremlin is cynically hoping to see Iraqi President Saddam Hussein overthrown and replaced by a more pliable Soviet puppet.

A top-secret Defense Intelligence Agency report noted recently, "Hussein seems to calculate correctly that Iraq's self-interest leads it to take a position somewhere between Russia and America. This could help it to be a force for stability in the [Persian] Gulf." But neither stability nor Iraqi neutrality is to the Soviets' interests.

Though Moscow has cut off supplies to its protégé, some of its East European satellites reportedly are providing Iraq with some arms, just as North Korea is shipping Soviet munitions to Iran.

Obviously, the East European arms shipments are tolerated by the Kremlin, just like the North Korean shipments to Iran. Meanwhile, the Russians continue to proclaim their neutrality by cutting off direct arms trade with either combatant.

Politically, the Soviets tilted toward Iran in October when they signed a friendship treaty with Syria, not long after Syria became one of the few Arab nations to voice its support of Iran in the war.

The "tilt" theory was summarized by one intelligence analyst this way: "The

Soviets see the Middle East as polarizing, and they have made a choice: go with Iran, the greater strategic asset. There is a slight tilt in Iran's favor. The Soviets may eventually be willing to hurt their relations with Iraq to pick up with Iran."

A "balance" theorist disagrees. "The Soviets are facing a dilemma," he said. "They are facing a hostile Iran and a suspicious Iraq. They are trying to keep both sides happy."

Typical of the Kremlin's maneuvering in the Middle East situation, the analysts agree, is the Russians' ambiguity in the American hostage issue. While publicly joining the worldwide denunciation of the hostage seizure, the Soviets for more than a year have beamed clandestine radio broadcasts to Iran praising and justifying the embassy takeover and imprisonment of the Americans.

And when the war with Iraq led Iran to begin serious negotiations over the hostages, the secret Soviet radio broadcasts warned Iranians that their problems wouldn't be solved just by ending the hostage crisis.

Whether the Iranian mullahs are deceived by such self-serving Soviet tactics is not clear to the intelligence community.

Certainly Iran's leaders are aware of the communist infiltration of their richest oil-producing province, and are equally aware of the Soviets' scorn for theocratic government. Perhaps their own monumental egomania leads the Iranians to believe they can use the Russians and avoid being used themselves.

And whether the Soviets are now "tilting" or "balancing," there is one disturbing possibility that would allow them to reap the advantages of both strategies: by maintaining at least an arguable semblance of neutrality in the Iraqi-Iranian war, the Russians may set themselves up as mediators to end the conflict. As the "honest broker" that brought peace to the Middle East, the Soviet Union could recover much of the peaceful image it lost by its Afghan aggression—and, more important, it could bring its secret "tilt" to fruition by dictating the peace terms.

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